

## PLACE

COMMENTARY ABOUT WHERE WE LIVE

# Envision Rentschler Field As High-Tech Brand

When United Technologies Corp. closed Rentschler Field in East Hartford a decade ago, one of the first proposals in the door for the newly available 600 to 700 acres was for an outlet mall.

It was a valid proposal from a national mall developer, but UTC turned it down. Malls were going up all over the area. UTC officials understood they had too good a development site to throw away on a redundant and uninspiring project. They chose, wisely, to wait for something better.

When the corporate airstrip closed, John Larson

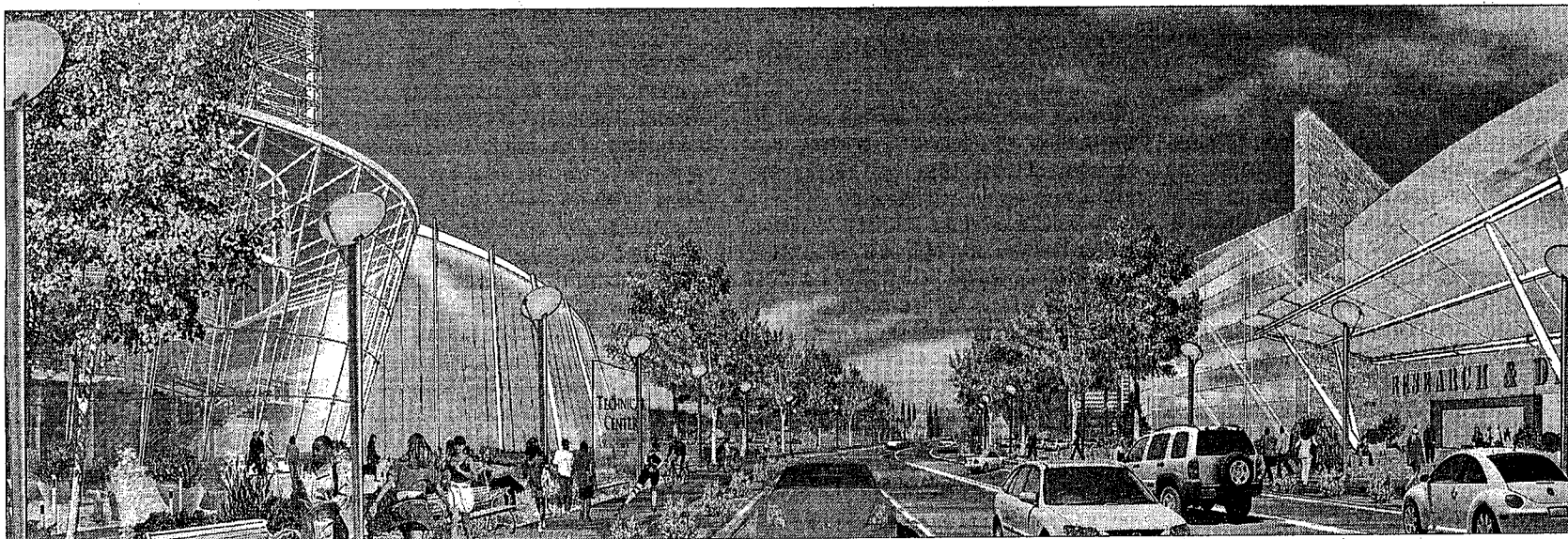


TOM CONDON

began thinking about a better use for the property. Growing up in East Hartford, Larson had seen the Pratt & Whitney division at its employment zenith and he knew what it meant for the region's economy.

Though the number of workers had dropped since the late 1950s and early 1960s (Pratt had some 30,000 workers in the state in the late 1950s, and has 12,500 today), Pratt and the United Technologies Research Center were still in East Hartford, and still had a mother lode of talented scientists. Larson began to formulate an idea for a science, technology and education campus on the part of the property that adjoins Pratt & Whitney and the United Technologies Research Center (the whole UTC footprint in East Hartford, including the 75 acres donated to the state for the football stadium, is about 1,000 acres).

The idea was to build on the existing aerospace and energy businesses and spin off new high-tech products and services. As UTC Chairman George David and others have said, we can't do much of the old smokestack manufacturing we once did; we have to make the complex, next-generation products that can't be made in developing



THE MATOS GROUP

**THIS RENDERING** of the Rentschler development shows a street in the complex, which will include retail, entertainment, housing and a high-tech research center.

countries.

Elected to Congress in 1998, Larson pursued the idea, first with UTC, then with the Air Force. He quietly gathered some of the best scientific and legal talent in the area and created the Connecticut Center for Advanced Technology in 2002. He won two federal grants to develop the concept.

It's come along remarkably well. The center is now located in the UT research center, with a staff of 15 administrators and scientists working in several areas: aerospace, energy, small business development, education and manufacturing of such things as fuel cells and lasers.

It just started a business incubator with three small companies, which have the potential to grow into larger companies. If they do, they'll need more space. The Center for Advanced Technologies also plans to move into its own building.

Enter Dan Matos. A former real estate lawyer with Day, Berry and Howard in Hartford, Matos has been named the developer of the Rentschler Field property by UTC. After 18 months of planning, he brought a master plan for the site to East Hartford

town officials last week.

It creates the template for a technology community, a town within a town. The site is organized around a series of boulevards and an interior ring road. The Pratt & Whitney and United Technologies Research Center facilities have room to grow on the western part of the property, as part of a technology park that will include the Center for Advanced Technologies and the new tech companies.

The plan calls for 500 to 1,000 residential units on the eastern part of the property, along with retail, office and entertainment near the center. There are nice touches throughout; towers at the Silver Lane entrance, a system of multiuse trails, a man-made lake. It's one of the most ambitious projects ever undertaken in these parts, a \$2 billion development that will take an estimated 18 years to build.

The master plan thus far is a broad statement of organization and infrastructure; the design details are still to come. But the thinking is right. The community Matos envisions supports the technology on the site, "and as long as I'm involved,

that won't change," he said.

That's the ticket. Whether or not the site has a Cabela's store is secondary to whether it is generating new technological products and services. The site should become a focal point for tech research and manufacturing in the area. "Rentschler Field" needs to become a brand, like "Route 128" or "Research Triangle."

Though his name is now associated with football, the actual Frederick Rentschler did not become famous by toting the old pigskin. He was a founder of Pratt & Whitney, whose Wasp engine laid the groundwork for the company that would become the largest private employer in Connecticut.

If the fuel cell takes off, becomes the Wasp of the 21st century, we must be making them here. That's why the Center for Advanced Technology and the Rentschler Field project are important.

*Tom Condon is the editor of Place. He can be reached at [condon@courant.com](mailto:condon@courant.com).*